

Ferrying the New Ride Home

by Bob Kirkby

For about a year I've been seriously considering another aeroplane to replace my Renegade when it finally sells. I considered a lot of different options but my partiality to biplanes eventually brought me around to the Stolp Starduster Too. I had looked closely at them on my last two trips to Arlington and was very impressed by their good looks, appropriate size, and flexibility in terms of engine options. Once decided the next question was how to get one. Although I enjoy building I really wasn't inclined to devote the time required to built one. That left two options, purchase a well advanced project to complete or find a flying model for sale. I spent several months exploring both options and came up with a project in the US that was well along but this might pose a problem convincing the MD-RA inspector that there was 51% remaining. I found no projects in Canada but I did find that two of the six Stardusters in Canada were for sale, one in Nova Scotia and one in BC.

In February I flew to Prince George, BC to see that one. I wasn't impressed. It had been through 5 owners in 25 years and was not in good enough condition for my liking. That left only one. In April I arranged a business trip to the Maritimes and took a side trip to Kentville, NS to look at the other Starduster. Fortunately this turned out to be in good condition and best of all I liked it. It was twenty years old, had been flown by the builder for 10 years and the current owner for the remaining time. With a 160 hp O-320 engine and a Hartzell constant-speed prop it wasn't the most powerful Starduster around, but a familiarization flight convinced me it was plenty powerful enough for what I wanted. John Haayer and I struck a deal and I started the long planning process required to pick it up and ferry it home on the May long weekend.

I spent Friday, May 18, winging my way east from Calgary to Halifax by commercial airlines. John met me at the airport about 5:00 pm and we drove to Kentville where I checked into a quaint, family run for centuries, motel. The weather was great so John suggested we get right out to the airport for my check ride since showers were forecast for Saturday. I eagerly agreed.

A ten minute drive to the Waterville airport and there she was sitting on the ramp awaiting her new master. The sensuous curves of the elliptical wings and the soft tones of the beige and red/orange paint scheme, highlighted by the late evening sun, reminded me why I love aeroplanes so. This beautiful Starduster Too biplane was about to be mine.

John explained the walk-around and then we were on to flight procedures and numbers. He put me in the front seat for the first few circuits (to see how I would do). I applied power slowly not wanting the tail to get away from me, but still did a waddle down the runway. As we climbed out



The 11-leg, 2100nm trip from Waterville, NS to Calgary, AB

John told me to be more aggressive on the power in order to get the tail up sooner and let the highly effective rudder do its job. The climb to circuit height was quick and smooth and the downwind was a slide. We did a fairly steep descent to maintain good runway visibility and my first landing turned out to be a great success. Aren't they all! From then on it was downhill.



Bob taxis the Starduster for circuits with John. Photo by Jeremy Dann

The second one wasn't as good but obviously wasn't too bad either since John suggested I switch to the rear seat for more challenge. And it was. The next couple of landings were too flat and I ended up hopping down the runway like Brear rabbit. After eight circuits, however, I was starting to get the hang of it. The sun was setting so we decided to quit while ahead and do the rest of the checkout the next day. We parked the Starduster and sat at a cluttered work bench in the corner of the dimly-lit hangar to do the transfer paperwork and exchange funds. I returned to the motel that night the proud owner of a new ride and with a good feeling of accomplishment.

Saturday brought drizzle and low ceilings. Flying was out of the question so I spent the afternoon puttering around the aeroplane and preparing for the long flight home (2100nm to be exact). I found a good place to mount my GPS antenna and places to tuck away maps, pencils, headset cables, etc. A lot of time was spent just sitting in the cockpit getting to know the layout and feel of everything. That evening, while dining at a local pub, I struck up a conversation with the man and woman at the next table. When he heard I was from Calgary he mentioned that he had spent a number of years instructing at Penhold while in the Air Force. Well, once we discovered we were both aviators you can imagine where the conversation went. Over dinner and a few beers I learned he was retired after a long and very interesting career flying for the Air Force. I had a great time listening to his tales of CF100 flying, his instructor stories, and finally his transition to helicopters.

Sunday, my planned departure day, dawned bright and clear. John and I did a couple of circuits after which I was feeling pretty comfortable with the aeroplane. John took the controls for one last time and did a low and over so his friend Jerome could snap a few final pictures. Then I fueled up, filed a flight plan and departed on my first leg to Fredericton, NB. John had suggested I fly straight across the Bay of Fundy but I wasn't quite confident enough to risk a 6 mile stretch of water, so I flew around the east end where I only had a two-mile then a three-mile hop across the water. Even so, I climbed to 6500 feet to be sure of enough glide distance. This was a great flight. The air was crisp, visibility was great and I was getting comfortable in the new bird. I was anxious to determine fuel burn rates so I flew at John's suggested 25 squared, which the Lycoming book says is 75% power. An hour and 20 minutes later I fueled up in Fredericton and calculated a 9 US gallon per hour burn rate. On the ramp I ran into a fellow with an RV-4 who recognized the Starduster and knew the builder, also from Fredericton.

The next leg was to be a long one - 2.3 hours. I planned to fly direct to Sherbrooke, Quebec which would take me straight across Maine. I flew this leg at 4500 feet which kept me above the Appalachian hills on either side of my course (the locals call them mountains). The countryside was beautiful. I went to take some pictures but discovered I had left the camera in my bag which was strapped into the front seat. Trees, water and rolling hills best describe Maine. This time I flew at 24 squared to conserve fuel and again get a measurement of fuel burn at a different power setting. As I crossed the border back into Quebec I switched back to 126.7Mhz and wasn't surprised to hear French being spoken. What did surprise me was that I heard nothing but French until I was well into Ontario on the next leg.



View over the nose of Quebec's Eastern Townships.

Sherbrooke has a private MF facility, the first I've seen. The local FBO operates the radio cab, presumably by agreement with Nav Canada, and luckily for me the fellow in attendance spoke English. If the traffic in the circuit had been relying only on advisory calls I would have had a problem since I neither speak nor understand French. It would have been a NORDO arrival.

I calculated the fuel burn on the second leg at 7.6 US gallons per hour at what I believe to be 65% power. Anything less than 8 is great. After only a brief station stop I was off again on the third leg, this time headed for Carp, Ontario (on the west side of Ottawa). Before leaving I retrieved the camera and started recording the rest of the trip on film. I think I got some great shots as I flew across the eastern townships, past Montreal, and along the St. Lawrence seaway to Cornwall. There I turned northwest to skirt the huge and low Ottawa TCA on the final hop into Carp. The further west I flew the more hazy it became and as I approached Carp visibility was down to under 15 miles. Although I still had time for my fourth leg to North Bay, I decided the haze would make flying into the western sun a big headache, so Carp would be my stop for the night.

As I fueled on the ramp at Carp a gentleman by the name of Jack Thorpe asked me if I recognized his aeroplane. I confessed I didn't. He proudly announce his beautifully restored bird is a 1946 Fleet Canuck. It turns out Jack is also a retired flying instructor from the Air Force and we had an enchanting conversation as he drove me to the nearest Holiday Inn. Jack is compiling data on the history of Fleet Canucks in the hopes of putting together a book in the near future.



At Carp before leaving on the second day.

Anyone interested in Fleets would certainly enjoy talking with Jack - he lives somewhere in Kanata.

Monday morning I cab'd it back to the airport at 7:30 looking forward to a great day of flying. The sky was clear except for a heavy haze that limited visibility to 10 miles. I filed for North Bay and departed shortly after 8:00. I flew direct to Petawawa then turned north over the Ottawa river to circumnavigate the restricted area around the Chalk River nuclear facility. Once past this it was straight for North Bay. The scenery wasn't much to click about due to the heavy haze. Arriving at North Bay, however, was a treat since I had lived there on the Air Force base during my teenage years. Now the Air Force has moved out and the facility has become just the municipal airport. Still it was a thrill to fly over my old home on the downwind leg and land on the same 10,000 foot runway where I use to watch CF101 Voodoos blasting off in full afterburner.

As I turned off the runway I asked North Bay radio to direct me to the FBO for fuel. The Flight Service Specialist pointed out the Shell truck and said, "Park and the fueller will drive over and fill you up." Apparently this was a coded message which I failed to decode properly. I pulled up in front of the Shell office and shut down but instead of a fuel attendant I was greeted by a surly security guard who told me I was in a no parking area and to move to the other side of the ramp where the little red flags were. The Shell man then appeared and began arguing that since I was already there and shut down he might as well fuel my aeroplane so I could be on my way. I found the torrid exchange quite entertaining, but in the end the security guard won and I had to start up and taxi to the other side, followed by the Shell man in his fuel truck. This is the only FBO I've seen with no parking in front of their business!

I had chosen to take the US route around the southern shore of Lake Superior where there were lots of airports rather than the Canadian route which would stretch my endurance. So my fifth leg would take me to the US side of the Sault Ste. Marie twin cities. The weather briefing didn't sound too encouraging. Things would deteriorate around Elliot Lake with a 2000 foot ceiling developing and visibility would decrease to 8 miles. Also, I only had about 4 hours before rain moved up from Wisconsin into the Sault. I took off quickly and was able to maintain 4500 feet until just past Sudbury. There I had to duck under a broken layer that would gradually thicken up as I flew west. I was coming up to the north side of a low pressure system which meant I encountered 20-25 knot tailwinds. This was both a blessing and a curse as I got there faster but since I had to stay low the mechanical turbulence was moderate all the way. I'm glad I had the GPS because map reading and pilotage became a real chore with the turbulence and the reduced visibility. The terrain wasn't anything to feel good about either. Like Maine it was trees and water all the way. It was, however, interesting to see the old mining sights around Elliot Lake.

The good old GPS did its job and guided me straight across the Saint Mary's river to Sanderson airport on the US side. By this time the surface winds were well above 20 knots and, although almost down the runway, created some serious mechanical turbulence on final. In spite of the fact that I was fighting it all the way down I was quite pleased with the smooth wheel landing I made. It was only 1:00pm by the time I finished clearing customs and fueling but I was ready to tie her down for the night. Karl, a very friendly FBO operator, helped me tie the Starduster down and then drove me to a local motel. Two hours later it started raining, and it rained and rained

and rained.

Tuesday morning didn't start off looking good. Locally it had stopped raining but the ceiling was down around 1500ft. 50 miles west was in IFR conditions. I checked out of the motel and went back to the airport expecting to have to bail out the Starduster. It wasn't so bad, only a little rain got in around the canopy and didn't cause any problems. I hung around the FBO office listening to Karl and a couple of others shoot the breeze all morning then checked weather again around noon. Although things were improving locally, to the west my next destination was still too much in the slime for my liking so I decided to resign myself to another night in beautiful downtown Sault Ste. Marie, USA. I rented an old car from Karl for \$27 and headed in search of a cheaper motel. I found one that was better and cheaper than the night before so checked in, pulled out my notebook computer and started writing this story. Tomorrow would no doubt present a different challenge.

Wednesday dawned with clouds hanging overhead at 900 ft. I was not impressed. After checking the weather on the Internet I was feeling a little happier as ceilings were forecast to lift to 2500 ft around noon. So I did some work in my room then headed for the airport about 10am. By the time I prepared for the next leg and got the Starduster ready the ceiling had not only lifted but the sun was shining. I filed for a route along the south shore of lake Superior, overflying a closed air force base by the name of Sawyer and landing for fuel at a small town in northern Wisconsin called Ironwood (240nm).



South shore of Lake Superior under a heavy sky.

The first leg was good with light turbulence, a light tail wind and sunshine. By the time I got to Sawyer, however, I had a broken ceiling at 2000 ft and rain cells were starting to appear. In between the cells I was encountering drizzle. As before I was flying along the northern side of a low so the further I went the stronger the tail wind became. This was giving me an extra 15 to 20 knot ground speed but was making it pretty bouncy. Flying a biplane in rough air is a full time job so before leaving the Sault I came up with a way of pre-folding maps to minimize the amount of re-folding required in the cockpit. It worked well. As I approached Ironwood the GPS was telling me it was straight ahead 3 miles but I was looking at a rain cell dumping water by the bucket load. I flew around the heavy rain cell to find the airport in the clear on the other side. I landed unceremoniously and as I was taxiing in the cell caught up with me. I sat in the cockpit on the ramp for 10 minutes waiting for the deluge to pass by.

Not all FBO's are created equal. When the rain stopped I climbed out and poked around a huge WWII vintage hangar looking for some sign of life. Finally I saw movement through a window in a dingy office well hidden in the back corner. A gentleman looked up as I walked in but said nothing. I said hello and asked if I could use a phone to close my flight plan and then purchase

some fuel. Without a word he pointed to a telephone and went back to doing what appeared to be nothing, although I don't profess to be an expert on the subject. When I hung up the phone he sprang into action and lead the way out to the fuel pump. I commented that it wasn't very busy today probably due to the weather, and he finally spoke, "Never busy around here." We were making progress. We fueled the Starduster in silence - I climb the ladder, he handed me the hose and I filled the tank. (I prefer to fill the tank myself, which always suits the line guys.) Back in the office we made more social progress as he showed me how to use their on-line weather computer. My next leg would take me around Duluth then northwest to Grand Rapids, Minnesota. It looked like I would be dodging rain cells for about another 50 miles then things would improve past Duluth so I got out the maps and started preparing.



One of many rain cells across Michigan and Wisconsin.

Back in the air again I dodged and ducked until past Duluth then the ceiling started to break up a bit and the rain showers stopped. There's no question of why Minnesota is called the land of lakes. It was lakes and trees with the occasional field. Fortunately there are lots of small roads crisscrossing the landscape so a forced landing could possibly be accomplished without tearing the wings off or going swimming. I made Grand Rapids in good time and found an FBO operation there that was the antithesis of Ironwood. The lineboy came out to help with fuel on the double and inside I found a friendly EAA'r who couldn't have been more helpful. He even offered to find me hangar space if I was staying the night. Since there was still lots of light so I opted to go an extra 65 nm to the next town, Bemidji, which is supposed to be the home of the mythical Paul Bunyon. I only know this because I drove through there 40 years ago and remember seeing a huge statute of Paul along the highway.

The Bemidji airport happened to be under a light rain shower when I arrived so I landed in the rain and got wet again. The Starduster certainly got washed a lot on this trip. This time I found a very busy high-end FBO with a number of Kingair's in the hangar. They didn't offer me hangar space but they also didn't charge anything for their tiedown space either. So I fueled up and got a ride to a Comfort Inn a couple of miles away. After battling the elements all day I was starving so I headed for the nearest restaurant, feasted on a steak dinner and relaxed.

My first leg the next day, Thursday, was from Bemidji to Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Checking the weather first thing showed Grant Forks, ND to be IFR with 800 foot ceilings, lifting to 1500 feet by 11:00am. This was par for the course. I went out to the airport about 9:00 and hung around the FBO office, checking the weather every hour, until 11:30. By then the ceiling at Grand Forks was up to 1800 feet so I departed. It wasn't so bad; by the time I got there the

ceiling was broken at 2000 feet and it got better as I flew west. Grand Forks was right on my route but there is an Air Force base a few miles west of the city so I diverted far enough south to be sure I was outside the base airspace. I was about 700 feet below the broken cloud base and as I came abeam the airport a KC135 tanker descended below the clouds on final for runway 34. It crossed my path about 300 feet higher and ½ mile ahead of me. It would have made a great picture except I was too busy scanning for other traffic to think of the camera. A few miles further on I noticed a strobe light a few hundred feet below my flight path. At first I thought it was another aeroplane, but as I got closer I realized it was the top of a tower. A check of the map indicated I was flying over a 766 foot tower.



On the ramp at Bemidji, MN.

Devil's Lake was a quick stop for fuel, a cross-border flight plan and a call to Canada Customs to advise of my arrival at Estevan, SK in two hours. A very cheerful lady on the phone rattled off a number then said, "Ops, I wasn't supposed to give you that number until after you land." "What number," I replied, "I'll give you a call from Estevan." The ceiling thickened up as I crossed central North Dakota, but as I neared the border I could see clear skies ahead. I was making good time since I still had a 10 knot tailwind and Estevan came into view sooner than expected. Once again this was a short stop for fuel, another call to customs and a new flight plan.

There is never anything to eat at these small airports so at each stop I would down a granola or fruit bar, but my stash was getting mighty low by this time. I had only two left so I ate one and saved the other for later. My next stop was Swift Current and I would decide when I got there if I would stay the night or push on for home.

Once again I had a good tailwind which is highly unusual. Trust me, flying west across Saskatchewan is almost never accompanied by a tail wind. I climbed up to 6500 feet but my ground speed decreased so I resigned myself to mechanical turbulence for the rest of the trip and went back down to 4500 feet where I was now getting a 10-15 knot boost. I arrived in Swift Current at 6:00pm local time and found the FBO closed. The last leg from Swift Current to home would be a little over 2 hours so I figured if I called for fuel and could get airborne again by 7:00pm I would be home well before dark. Twenty minutes later a very cheerful lady showed up, apologized for not being available, dispensed the bug juice, and I was out of there by 6:45.

My last leg turned out to be highly eventful. The sky was clear and the winds were favourable until about 80 miles from Calgary. By then the sun was getting low so the winds were diminishing but ahead I could see a lot of black clouds rising very high indeed. I studied this intently and by the time I was 40 miles back I saw black clouds reaching from south of Calgary to Airdrie on the north and from the ground to about 10000 feet. Most interesting of all were the spectacular lightning bolts emanating from this hulk. This decision was a no-brainer. No way was I going any closer to that thing. I tuned into the Calgary Terminal frequency and discovered

the storm was moving east at about 6 knots and had just cleared the Calgary airport, which put it directly over my home base, Chestermere-Kirkby Field. I turned south and headed for Vulcan, which was well clear of the storm.

As I taxied to the ramp at Vulcan a pickup truck came up the driveway. I was greeted at the pilots lounge by a gentleman who said he saw me in the circuit and came out to see if I needed fuel. What service! I took Jack Deans up on his fuel offer and we spent the next hour talking airplanes as I waited for the storm to move on. Meanwhile I called Flight Services to extend my flight plan time and get an update on the storm. About 9:45 I figured the storm was far enough east for me to get in and there would be just enough daylight left for the 30 minute trip home. I said good bye to Jack and was off on my last, unplanned leg. The storm had moved far enough east that the flight was smooth and in the clear, but it turned out to be a little darker than expected since the mountains were covered with heavy clouds and the sunset was more obscured than normal. However, I had no trouble finding the runway and set the Starduster down on the soft grass in the last remnants of daylight, bringing an end to my epic flight across Canada.

It was with a great feeling of satisfaction that I tucked the Starduster away in her new hangar Thursday night. She had performed flawlessly for 20 hours of flying over 2100 nautical miles. I was very tired but very happy.



Southern edge of storm. Home is hidden on right.